

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DACCA 00891 01 OF 02 191322Z

46

ACTION AID-05

INFO OCT-01 NEA-09 ISO-00 IGA-01 AGR-05 CIAE-00 COME-00

EB-07 INR-07 LAB-04 NSAE-00 SP-02 STR-01 TRSE-00

CIEP-01 FRB-03 OMB-01 L-02 H-01 DODE-00 PA-01 USIA-06

PRS-01 EUR-12 SIL-01 IO-10 /081 W

----- 094520

R 190745Z FEB 75

FM AMEMBASSY DACCA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5834

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 DACCA 0891

E.O. 111652: N/JN

TAGS: ELAB, PINT, OG

SUBJECT: THE LABOR SITUATION IN BANGLADESH AND AID FY75
SUPPORT OF AAFLI

REF: STATE 29422

1. BEFORE DISCUSSING AAFLI'S PROPOSALS, THE MISSION THINKS IT TIMELY TO COMMENT ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN BANGLADESH OF THE CURRENT STATE OF EMERGENCY AND THE RECENT CONSTITUTIONAL SHIFT TO AN AUTHORITARIAN PRESEDENTIAL SYSTEM.

2. STATE OF EMERGENCY. THE STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED DECEMBER 28, 1974, SUSPENDS THE GUARANTEE OF ALL FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS, SUCH AS FREEDOM OF SPEECH, MOVEMENT, ASSOCIATION, AND OCCUPATION. THE EMERGENCY POWER RULES GIVE THE BDG THE RIGHT TO REGULATE (AND PROHIBIT IF DESIRED) ALL MEETINGS AND POLITICAL PARTIES AND OTHER ASSOCIATIONS DEEMED PREJUDICIAL TO A BROADLY CONCEIVED NATIONAL INTEREST. AMONG THE "PREJUDICIAL
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PAGE 02 DACCA 00891 01 OF 02 191322Z

ACTS" WHICH ARE PERTINENT TO LABOR UNIONS ARE THOSE WHICH

IMPEDE OR DELAY TRANSPORT AND THE SUPPLY OF ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES; HAMPER THE MAINTENANCE OF SUCH SUPPLIES AND SERVICES; ADVERSELY AFFECT THE ECONOMIC OR FINANCIAL INTERESTS OF THE STATE; OR CAUSE OR INCITE WORK CESSATIONS EXCEPT THESE INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES AS DEFINED IN PREVIOUS ORDINANCES.

3. IN ADDITION TO BANNING STRIKES, BDG MOVED AGAINST THE LABOR UNIONS JANUARY 6 WHEN IT INVOKED EMERGENCY POWERS RULES TO BAN AS PREJUDICIAL "ALL ORGANIZATIONS ... FORMED BY PERSONS EMPLOYED IN ANY OFFICE OF THE GOVERNMENT OR OF ANY LOCAL AUTHORITY, OR OTHER AUTHORITY, CORPORATION OR BODY ESTABLISHED ... BY THE GOVERNMENT OR BY OR UNDER ANY LAW." EFFECTIVELY, THIS ACT COVERS EMPLOYEE ACTIVITIES, EXCEPT FOR COOPERATIVES AND RECREATIONAL GROUPS, IN GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES, IN THE NATIONALIZED JUTE, TEXTILE, AND SUGAR INDUSTRIES AND THE GOVERNMENT-MANAGED TRANSPORTATION, STEEL, TEA ESTATES, AND IN MOST OF THE BANKS--IN EFFECT THE ENTIRE PUBLIC SECTOR OF BANGLADESH. MOREOVER, WITH THE THREAT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO REGULATE AND PROHIBIT MEETINGS AS WELL AS ASSOCIATIONS, OTHER UNIONS IN GENERAL APPEAR TO BE SUSPENDING MEMBERSHIP GATHERINGS; THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES MEET AND THEN ATTEMPT TO SEE MEMBERS INDIVIDUALLY OR IN SMALL GROUPS.

4. ONE PARTY STATE AND THE UNIONS. THE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT OF JANUARY 25 GIVES NOW-PRESIDENT SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN ABSOLUTE POWERS IN GOVERNING BANGLADESH AND CONFERS ON HIM THE RIGHT, AT HIS DISCRETION, TO ESTABLISH A ONE-PARTY STATE. WE EXPECT A SINGLE NATIONAL PARTY TO BE ANNOUNCED IN THE COMING WEEKS AND ALL OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES TO BE BANNED. RELIABLE SOURCES REPORT THAT MUJIB ALSO PLANS TO BAN ALL LABOR AFFILIATES OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND ESTABLISH A SINGLE LABOR FRONT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF HIS NEPHEW, SHEIKH FAZUL HUQ MONI, NEWSPAPER EDITOR AND UNION LEADER IN THE TEJGAON INDUSTRIAL AREA NEAR DACCA. THE NEW LABOR FRONT WILL PROBABLY BE A VARIATION ON THE CURRENT JATIYO SHRAMIK LEAGUE (JSL), BUT WHETHER THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP WILL BE RETAINED IN THE HIERARCHY IS PROBLEMATIC. THE JSL'S GENERAL SECRETARY ABDUL MANNAN, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 DACCA 00891 01 OF 02 191322Z

FOR ONE, WAS JAILED AFTER EMERGENCY RULE WAS DECLARED ON CHARGES OF MISMANAGEMENT AND MISAPPROPRIATION OF FUNDS IN HIS CAPACITY AS CHAIRMAN OF THE DACCA COTTON MILLS CORPORATION.

5. MUJIB IS MAKING AN EFFORT TO GET ALL OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES, IN ADDITION TO HIS FELLOW PRO-SOVIET "PATRIOTIC PARTIES" OF NAP/MUZAFFAR AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF

BANGLADESH, TO JOIN THE NEW PARTY VOLUNTARILY. WE CAN, THEREFORE, EXPECT THAT THE NEW LABOR FRONT WILL INCLUDE AT LEAST THE LEADERS OF THE NAP/MUZAFFAR-AFFILIATED TRADE UNION CENTER AND GROUPS ALIGNED WITH THE CPB. IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE (ALTHOUGH NOT PROBABLE AT PRESENT) THAT SUCH DISSIDENT GROUPS AS (A) M.A. MOTALIB'S NATIONAL WORKERS' FEDERATION, (B) THE CHITTAGONG (FORMERLY HANNAN) FACTION OF THE JSL, AND (C) THE JSD--NATIONAL CIALIST PARTY--OR SHAHJAHAN FACTION OF THE JSL WILL BE REPRESENTED. IF THESE GROUPS JOIN VOLUNTARILY, PRESUMABLY THEY WILL DO SO ONLY ON THE BASIS OF HAVING SOME NOMINAL SHARE IN THE LEADERSHIP.

6. AAFLI'S VIEW. AAFLI'S REPRESENTATIVES IN DACCA ARE OF THE OPINION THAT A NEW LABOR FRONT WILL NOT MATERIALLY AFFECT THEIR PROGRAM FOR THE PRESENT. THEY BELIEVE THAT THE DESIRE FOR DEMOCRATIC TRADE UNIONISM REMAINS STRONG AMONG MANY LABOR GROUPS AND THAT AAFLI HAS GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIPS ON THE OPERATING LEVEL WITH THE JSL. MORE-OVER, THEY FEEL THAT AS LONG AS PRESIDENT MUJIB (WHO FINALLY SIGNED OFF ON AAFLI'S PAPERS) IS AMENABLE TO THEIR PRESENCE, THEIR PROGRAM CAN CONTINUE, ALTHOUGH THEY INTEND TO BE MODEST AND CIRCUMSPECT IN THEIR ACTIVITIES. AAFLI ALSO BELIEVES THAT THE LEADERS OF MANY INDIVIDUAL UNIONS ARE SO WELL SUPPORTED BY THEIR MEMBERSHIP THAT THE BDG WOULD PERFORCE HAVE TO LEAVE THEM IN CHARGE AND ALLOW THEM TO INFLUENCE LABOR POLICY.

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PAGE 01 DACCA 00891 02 OF 02 191307Z

46

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EB-07 INR-07 LAB-04 NSAE-00 SP-02 STR-01 TRSE-00

CIEP-01 FRB-03 OMB-01 L-02 H-01 DODE-00 PA-01 USIA-06

PRS-01 EUR-12 SIL-01 IO-10 /081 W

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R 190745Z FEB 75

FM AMEMBASSY DACCA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5835

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 DACCA 0891

7. WE QUESTION, HOWEVER, WHETHER SUCH ASSUMPTIONS ARE YET WARRANTED. WE DO KNOW THAT MUJIB HAS BEEN UNHAPPY WITH THE LABOR MOVEMENT FOR SOME TIME. A NEW LABOR LAW HAS BEEN DELAYED FOR OVER TWO YEARS BY THE DESIRE OF SOME ADVISORS, IF NOT MUJIB HIMSELF, FOR A COMPULSORY SINGLE NATIONAL LABOR UNION, OR AT LEAST ONLY ONE UNION IN EACH INDUSTRY. NOW IT APPEARS THAT THE SINGLE UNION WILL BE REALIZED. IT IS TOO OPTIMISTIC TO BELIEVE THAT BUSINESS WILL GO ON AS BEFORE, EVEN ACCOUNTING--AS BOTH AAFLI AND THE MISSION DOES--FOR THE FACT THAT NO ARBITRARILY IMPOSED STRUCTURE IS GOING TO ELIMINATE THE FACTIONALISM, MANEUVERINGS, AND POWER PLAYS AMONG BENGAL LEE LABOR LEADERS.

8. A SECOND FACTOR TO CONSIDER IS THE AMBITION OF SHEIKH MONI. HE HAS TRIED FOR SEVERAL YEARS TO MAKE HIMSELF THE PREEMINENT LABOR LEADER, A MOVE THAT WAS THWARTED LAST JUNE WHEN THE JSL NATIONAL CONVENTION RETURNED THE SAME SLATE OF LEADERS WITH WHICH AAFLI HAS BEEN DEALING. MONI'S OTHER VEHICLE TO POLITICAL POWER HAS BEEN HIS JUBO (YOUTH) GRAGUE. IF, AS WE UNDERSTAND, THE YOUTH FRONT OF THE NW PARTY WILL BE HEADED BY ABDUR RAZZAK, THE AWAMI LEAGUE'S ORGANIZING SECRETARY, THEN MONI WILL LIKELY CONCENTRATE HIS ENERGIES ON THE LABOR FIELD, HOWEVER

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PAGE 02 DACCA 00891 02 OF 02 191307Z

MUCH HE MAY BE DISLIKED BY THE PRESENT JSL LEADERSHIP. IT IS CORRECT TO ASSERT THAT WHAT HAPPENS WILL BE MUJIB'S DECISION, BUT MONI'S INFLUENCE ON HIS UNCLE IS STRONG RIGHT NOW. FROM WHAT LITTLE WE KNOW OF ANY COHERENT VIEWS HE HOLDS ON LABOR, MONI IS NOT PREDISPOSED TOWARD FREE TRADE UNIONISM. HE IS AN EXPOUNDER OF THE STANDARD ANTI-IMPERIALIST, ANTI-CAPITALIST, "SOCIALIST" STATE OF THE PROLETARIAT.

9. AAFLI'S PROGRAM. GIVEN THE CURRENT AND PROBABLE POLITICAL/LABOR SITUATION IN BANGLADESH, AAFLI'S PROPOSAL (REFTEL, PARA 1) STRIKES US AS DECIDEDLY AMBITIOUS. FIRST OF ALL, IT IS DESIGNED FOR SUPPORT OF THE PRESENT JSL, WHOSE CONTINUED INDEPENDENCE IS IN DOUBT AS ARE THE LEADERSHIP AND POLICIES OF ANY SUCCESSOR LABOR FRONT AND THE PERMITTED LEVEL OF ALL INDIVIDUAL UNION ACTIVITY. AAFLI VERY LIKELY HAS IDENTIFIED OMPETENT LABOR LEADERS WHOM IT WOULD LIKE TO ASSIST WITH FURTHER TRAINING, AS IT IS DOING NOW. BUT AAFLI'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE SUCH TRAINING TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE MAY BE SEVERLY LIMITED IF THE NEW UNION IS NOT AS SYMPATHETIC TO FREE TRADE UNIONISM

AS IS THE PRESENT LEADERSHIP. BECAUSE OF THIS UNCERTAINTY,
WE ALSO QUESTION THE COMMITMENT OF FUNDS TO EQUIPMENT,
VEHICLES, AND BUILDING SUPPLIES FOR UNION CENTERS.

10. IN EFFECT, WHILE NOT NEGATING ENTIRELY THE POSSIBI-
LITY THAT AAFLI CAN HAVE A CREDITABLE PROGRAM HERE, EVEN
GIVEN THE CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES, THE MISSION QUESTIONS
WHETHER THE COSTS INVOLVED WILL BE WORTH THE PROBABLE
BENEFITS. WE SUGGEST, THEREFORE, THAT THE PROGRAM BE
SCALED DOWN TO THE MINIMUM ESSENTIALS--BASIC OVERHEAD
AND A SMALL TRAINING PROGRAM--ONLY SUCH ITEMS NECESSARY TO
MAINTAIN AN AAFLI PRESENCE UNTIL THE CURRENT POLITICAL
AND LABOR SITUATION IN BANGLADESH IS CLARIFIED.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: MARTIAL LAW, POLITICAL SITUATION, LABOR UNIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 19 FEB 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: RowellE0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975DACCA00891
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750059-0158
From: DACCA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750233/aaaabdcq.tel
Line Count: 237
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION AID
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 75 STATE 29422
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: RowellE0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 04 AUG 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <04 AUG 2003 by izenbei0>; APPROVED <21 NOV 2003 by RowellE0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: THE LABOR SITUATION IN BANGLADESH AND AID FY75 SUPPORT OF AAFLI
TAGS: ELAB, PINT, BG, AAFLI
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006